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Kenneth Goldsmith, or The Art of Being Talked About

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I've been thinking a bit about Kenneth Goldsmith lately, in part because he seems to have become ubiquitous in some poetry circles, and in part because he's an engaging guy. I suppose my thoughts could best be summarized as follows:

1. I really like Ubuweb, and I'm glad Goldsmith put it together. It's one of the marvels of the poetry-oriented Internet. Long may it wave!
2. I like thinking about the idea of Goldsmith's books. I don't like reading them, but as he himself has said in "Being Boring," reading them isn't really the point. They're a bit more like Duchamp's "Fountain," which exists less to be looked at than to spark thought and to be discussed.
3. I like that Goldsmith's career has a real trajectory to it, a series of changes that often seem to have come out of what he's discovered along the way. He began as a sculptor, started carving books onto wood, got interested in text, and then became fascinated by the bulk of existing text, and the various means of manipulating or re-presenting that text. This is cool. Too many otherwise admirable artists and writers get caught in their own early idiom and fail to evolve significantly. Sometimes this means decline, sometimes it just means they keep making the same piece, often a very good piece, over and over (sometimes I feel this is what happened to Charles Simic). It's good to see someone really take a journey, which is, after all, what the word "career" means.

4. There are points, especially lately, where Goldsmith seems to be going in a direction that (like a lot of what he does) has been taken before in the art world, but has been less common in the poetry world. It's a turn to the idea of the career itself as the most important medium of the art. There are plenty of ways to do this, but the way Goldsmith seems to be going is one that people who are critical of the apparatus of fame, the market in cultural capital and symbolic goods, and the construction of status might find disconcerting. I'm not sure I have a strong opinion on it as a part of his journey, but (for what it's worth) it's a direction I personally see as a bit — what? — I suppose "destined to produce unhappiness for those who take it" is the phrase.

5. Sometimes I find a bit of an Oedipal urge in him, a desire to dismiss the old kings so that the new, young king (let's call him Goldsmith) can ascend the throne. This sort of thing is pretty common among poets, including some of the truly great ones: when Robert Lowell died John Berryman is said to have asked "who's number one now?" with hopes that it would be him [Update: I've got this wrong — Berryman died before Lowell]. The whole Oedipal trip runs counter to my own semi-Deleuzian anti-Oedipal beliefs, but that's neither here nor there, really.

6. I think, too, that Goldsmith often seems to believe in a linear, progressive version of artistic and literary history, a view that many people in the art world feel has been discredited — and a view that I think of in several ways: as something tied up with the Oedipal desire for dominance; as something that falsifies the rich pluralism of artistic and literary production; as something linked to the logic of the marketplace; and as something that, ultimately, isn't good for poetry. I should note that there are moments in Goldsmith's writing in which he seems to believe something else entirely.

7. I consider myself someone who disagrees with an idea of artistic progress that is implicit in many of Goldsmith's public statements. I don't share what I take to be his Oedipal desire for prominence, but I don't think that desire makes him less interesting or valuable. As for the embracing of the career as a medium for art: I like it. But I'm a bit skittish about the particular form his embrace of the medium seems to take. None of this means that I'm not interested in what he's doing. Although he's claimed to be the most boring writer ever to have lived, he's not boring as a presence. He's got the art of being talked about down, people. Down.

So, that said, let's start with a recent, mild-mannered quote from Goldsmith's piece about poetic reputations called "The Bounce and the Roll" that he wrote for Harriet, the Poetry Foundation's blog: "... we might have turned a corner where, in fact, for many people, the marketing, accounting, and management of their career [sic] has actually become their art." Goldsmith says he's thinking about an unnamed poet friend whose interest in poetry is slowly being supplanted by an interest in the online signifiers of reputation (sales rankings, Google alerts about his books, etc.), and for

whom the cultivation and management of reputation and image "may actually be his new literary production." Nothing seems to be at issue but the possible actions of an unnamed poet. But if we look around at other statements Goldsmith has made, we get a sense that this sort of thing has been on his mind a lot, and not just when it crops up in other people's lives. There's some reason to believe he's talking not only about others, but about the way his own interests have been heading.

Firstly, Goldsmith has long been interested in the idea that the actual act of reading his works is of less importance than the idea of the book — that the writing is less important than the concept, and the conversations one might have about that concept. As he put it in the 2004 lecture "Being Boring," "You don't really need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like: you just need to know the general concept." Or again, in the same lecture, "I like the idea that you can know each of my books in one sentence... [one can] know what I do without ever having read a word of it." I suppose there are some people in the poetry world who'd be made angry by this kind of gesture, but it's pretty old-school in the art world from which Goldsmith comes. Lucy Lippard called it "the dematerialization of the art object" her book *Six Years*, which treated the period from 1966-1972.

Why is this relevant here, where I'm trying to speculate about a turn to the career itself as the main object of Goldsmith's concern? Because it shows us how Goldsmith distances himself from the idea of the text-as-art-object, and moves toward the effect, the stimulation of thought, and the generation of conversation about the object as the real medium of his art. It's not quite the artist's career as the artist's medium, but it is a step in that direction.

Secondly, just two days after the publication of "The Roll and the Bounce," Goldsmith published another piece in *Harriet*, one in which he classed himself in the group of those who, like his unnamed poet-friend, obsessed over their online reputation. The piece, called "Death of a Kingmaker," took on the matter of the way Ron Silliman's blog has changed over the years, and gave us an image of Goldsmith and others "oxygen-starved" for attention, going to Silliman's blog and "checking each morning to see whether something we were involved with got a mention." It hasn't just been the anonymous poet-friend who's been obsessing about reputation. Goldsmith has too (he claims this has been a condition endemic in the poetry world, but that hasn't been my experience — though I hang out with a different crowd).

Has this obsession resulted in an active turn to the career as the medium itself? Well, that would be consistent with both Goldsmith's past and his trajectory. Goldsmith has, after all, worked closely on Andy Warhol, even editing *I'll be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews with Wayne Kostenbaum and Reva Wolf*. He's sympathetic (in a way more stick-in-the-mud poetry types aren't) to that great Warhol move, the subordination of the created work to the performing self. Warhol was, of course, a printmaker and a filmmaker and all the rest, but in

some profound sense these things were only subordinate parts of a larger work, the creation and performance of Andy Warhol. His real media were less printmaking and filmmaking than the art-world and the attention economy, which he worked masterfully. Goldsmith talks informatively and sympathetically about some of this in a variety of contexts, including "The Bounce and the Roll," where he compares his anonymous friend to Warhol, who, "like a marketer crunching his numbers" was obsessed with his own publicity and with "the quantification of taste." In addition to this interest in Warhol as a self-fashioner, working the art scene around him as an artistic medium and creating "Andy Warhol, Art Star" as his main work, Goldsmith certainly seems to have taken the bull of reputation by the horns: if anyone is ubiquitous in the little world of poetry lately, it's him. And he seems even to have influenced the way the history of poetry is perceived: Marjorie Perloff's recent study *Unoriginal Genius* might almost have been subtitled "a useable past for those who would study Kenneth Goldsmith," in that it presents a previously-untraced history of textual manipulation and appropriation that seems to culminate in Goldsmith's *Traffic*. He's not writing sonnets, people, he's being a poetry presence. Or so it seems from where I've been sitting.

The turn to the career-as-medium is neither here nor there in itself. I mean, one of the interesting things that happened in art in the twentieth century was the opening up of the category of legitimate media to include, hypothetically, anything: stone, glass, clay, paint, murals, earthworks, video, performance, piles of junk, happenings, and even the art-world itself. Warhol's use of the art-world, celebrity culture, and public image as media for art could be masterful, and often had a kind of critical edge: in acquiescing to the marketplace, he criticized the notion of the heroically autonomous artist; and in producing his seemingly endless repeated images, sometimes deliberately shoddily (more Elvises! More Marylins!) he drew attention to the invasion of the logic of the marketplace into the field of aesthetics. Others were even better. Gugliemi Achille Cavellini, for example, made self-canonization in art history not just his goal, but also his medium of expression. As John Held Jr. puts it, Cavellini's was an "art of 'self-historification'" that took the form of "a series of self-produced books, performances, festivals, portraits, novelty items, and voluminous correspondence" with which he sought to place himself in art history. In 1971 he even produced the publicity materials for a centennial retrospective of his work to be held in 2014. I'm kind of hoping someone actually puts on the show. It's a bravura performance, sometimes mocking and sometimes embodying the desperation of the artist for consecration and cultural capital.

What I haven't seen in Goldsmith is any indication that he's at all interested in using the career-as-artistic-medium with any kind of critical edge regarding things like status, fame, or cultural capital. Even when he says that some people might consider career-obsession "a silly game," he doesn't suggest that this might be the case because the pursuit of reputation is for chumps, a mere

expression of the vanity of human wishes, or a kind of complicity with the logic of the marketplace. Rather, he thinks those who consider it silly do so because the pursuit offers "no verifiable return whatsoever." It all seems a bit caught up in the logic of fame, cultural capital, and the reputation market. Maybe I'm missing the critical edge somewhere. And (more probably) it may be that I'm wrong about Goldsmith following the arc of his career to a place where the career becomes the main production. But he does seem to be thinking about this direction, and he does hustle heavily in the little world of poetry. (My own thoughts on the pursuit of recognition and status are of little enough interest, but if you want them, they crop up sometimes in Laureates and Heretics, and you can find some here, too. Mostly I just find the pursuit of status as a kind of hedonic treadmill — if you start wanting it, enough is never enough. Don't get me started, or I'll start quoting Sartre and Milton and Samuel Johnson, and maybe even mention some conversations with much-acclaimed poets who still seem to crave constant stroking).

But back to the matter of hustling for reputation in the little world of poetry. This is where the Oedipal desire to lay the old king to rest comes into play. Consider Goldsmith's two recent Harriet posts. In each post, he takes one of the canonical figures of language writing — Charles Bernstein in "The Bounce and the Roll" and Ron Silliman in "Death of a Kingmaker" — and politely, affectionately, but nevertheless firmly assigns them to the dustbin of history. Bernstein, says Goldsmith, was the perfect example of the poet who builds his importance by a process Goldsmith calls the "slow roll": a decades-long process of writing, pedagogy, and activism that culminate in a "solid career." But this sort of career, and Bernstein with it, belong to the past, since we now live in the "moment of the bounce, where Google Alerts are triggered at the mere mention of an author's name or work." In the new media environment, it seems that those who say "what is written has become secondary to how a literary work makes its way out into the world" may well "have a point." And the book-writing Bernstein? Well, he may have been the best man with a horse and buggy, but we've moved on to Goldsmith's Prius, and Bernstein is no longer a relevant model for the poet. Or so Goldsmith implies. And Ron Silliman? Well, he's the "kingmaker" of Goldsmith's title, and he seems to have died. Goldsmith ends with well-wishes for Ron as a writer, but I think it's telling that Goldsmith sees people in terms of how they can make or break reputations, and telling, too, that he seems to want to consign the lions of Ye Olde Langpo to the past, presumably to make way for something new. Marjorie Perloff seems to have come on board for this project of dethroning the old kings, too: Unoriginal Genius argues that poets from modernism through language poetry were still seeking an original voice, but the new "conceptual generation" has moved beyond all that, into a more comfortable relationship with "unoriginal" types of textual appropriation. Out with the old — gently, politely — and enter the conceptualists, led by the ubiquitous Goldsmith! Goldsmith did, after all, leave the art world for the poetry scene because he wanted to make his mark in history, and thought he had a better shot at it in poetry

than in art (he says as much in a 2007 Harriet post called "The End of History").

Again, this sort of desire to knock off the old kings and be the new king isn't unusual (you can't go far in the prose of the young Ezra Pound before you run into it). What's interesting about it to me here, though, is that it seems like another indicator that Goldsmith might be on the cusp of making the creation of a career, rather than the creation of texts, his main art form. He's got the Warholian example, the imagination to see the world beyond the text as his medium, and the Oedipal motive — and he's been talking with real interest about the possibility of the electronic manipulation of one's career as a possible future medium of art.

And this mention of the future of art brings me to the question of how Goldsmith seems to conceive of the shape and direction of literary history. If we're looking for consistency in answering this question, we're going to be disappointed: Goldsmith's got an active mind, and seems to respond more to the particulars of the occasion of writing than to some inner hobgoblin of consistency. But the center of gravity in his thinking keeps coming back to the idea of a linear procession of generations, in which (as he put it in "The End of History,") "conceptual writing" is "the next generation." "I often use Brion Gysin's quote from 1959 that poetry is 50 years behind painting," says Goldsmith in the same essay, before telling us that art-world types like himself have a "absolutely staggering" for making a name for themselves in literary history by bringing the poets up to speed.

The ironic thing about this linear version of history, in which one thing is going on until it is replaced by another thing, is that it's a pretty old-fashioned idea. It has its origin in specific historical circumstances in the late nineteenth century, when for complicated reasons artists started seeking status not from a community beyond themselves, but from other producers. Since established producers seemed impossible to challenge on their own terms, there was a kind of arms-race to produce new schools and styles, so as not to have to challenge the established masters on their own terms. Instead, one could dismiss them as obsolete (if you want to read the story in all its glorious detail, a good place to start would be Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production*). Of course the drama of discrediting the established masters didn't result in the old guys stopping doing what they were doing, nor did it stop others from picking up the old techniques and running with them. But it did dismiss these techniques from the spotlight. So the linear history is less a true representation of things than a way of claiming importance for oneself and one's peers, and hiding the true diversity of aesthetic production. The Museum of Modern Art used to present its collections in a manner that seemed to lead up to the inevitable triumph of Cubism and Picasso, but when they re-organized, they chucked this kind of linear history for a manner of presentation that tried to emphasize multiple paths and plural histories — effectively getting rid of the sort of linear "there was this generation, but then they were superseded by that

generation" narrative on which Goldsmith fixates.

For me, an old way of looking at things isn't necessarily a wrong way of looking at things. But in this case, I really do think the linear narrative of literary history is an enormous misrepresentation of the actual state of affairs. Conceptual writing is something that's going on. But it's a tiny part of the sum total of what's being written, even by members of the generation born around 1961, the year Goldsmith was born. To dismiss all that writing by saying that people who are not engaged in a particular practice are not "relevant" or not "responding to their time" (a phrase Goldsmith has used) is to argue that there is only one way to respond to our times — which is patently false. I mean, crawling into a cave and trying to write runic poetry on stones, if one did it now, would be a response to our times, since the imaginative rejection of the present moment is a very powerful and critical way of responding to that moment (think of all the Victorian medievalism of guys like William Morris: it was a radical response to the industrial moment). To buy into the linear model is to replace the enormous, messy, rhizomatic field of actual poetic production with a narrow world, and to claim absolute importance for a tiny portion of things, while willfully ignoring or dismissing the rest (or, I suppose, just not being aware of it). The linear model is, in short, a lie. But if you want to make a mark in history, if you want to kill off the big names of the past and be a big name yourself —if, in short, you want to be talked about, then it's a pretty tempting lie to tell. You could even convince yourself it's true.

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